Black Children's Books

Giving children the gift of identity

By Gail Berkley

"Children learn what they live" is the title of a popular verse often given to expectant parents or those who have recently had a new addition to their family. Daphne Muse, a Black Children's literature specialist at Mills College in Oakland, takes this phrase one step further and emphasizes that children learn what they read.

"When a child opens a book and it consistently portrays him in a secondary role, he will feel secondary," Ms. Muse stated last week during a lecture on "The Black Experience in Children's Literature" at the Women's Center on the campus of the University of California Berkeley.

When survey after survey is finding that today's children for a number of reasons are not learning their basic skills at school, the responsibility of the parents to see that their children receive the tools they will need to function later in life is increasing. One area where parents can aid their children is in the selection of books for them to read. As the holiday season is upon us, Ms. Muse suggested that books would be a favorable alternative to toys as gifts for children.

When a parent gives a child one of the many fine Black children's books, not only is the child bound to be more interested in furthering his reading skills, but he is at the same time getting a positive image of himself. The lack of this positive image can be most harmful to the child.

"I still feel what happened to me as a child, Ms. Muse confided. Even growing up in predominantly black Washington, D.C. She said the only Black author she read as a child was Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

"If I had continued to hang with the Nancy Drew Books, I might have been in a very precarious position. I often wonder today what made me through." Ms. Muse read a poem titled "How I Love Myself" which was written by a sixth grader at Malcolm X School in Berkeley to illustrate the positive affects on children - of reading good books. After a workshop on Black literature, the child wrote that she loved herself like cornbread loves black-eyed peas, and other lines in a similar vein. Before the workshop, Ms. Muse stressed, the children in the workshop didn't even know why their school was named Malcolm X.

"But when many of us think of Black Children's literature, the first book we come up with is Little Black Sambo and often the list stops there. But as Ms. Muse made her audience aware, there is a rich tradition and long list of Black Children's literature in the United States. In fact, "Little Black Sambo" is not Black literature at all...It deals with an East Indian child.

Growing from an oral tradition, Black Children's literature employs Black English and explicit graphics, some critics have spoken ill of it. Graphics which show the little boy with a ruddy nose and another which shows the sister and brother in the bathroom together have disturbed some adults, but Ms. Muse said she always asks a child's opinion of a book before passing judgment on it. She has found that "children's reaction to the book is great."

"Moja Means One" a Swahili counting book by Muriel Feelings, and Six Black Masters of American Art by Human Bearden and Henry Henderson, are two educational children's books she recommended.

Books Unlimited at 1755 Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley, Marcus Bookstore, 340 MacAllister in San Francisco and New Day bookstore at 6th Divisadero, she recommended as good places to find Black and other world children's literature.

Ms. Muse also encouraged her audience to make use of the public libraries in the area. The Berkeley Public Library's main branch on Shattuck and Center Streets, she said, has an excellent selection of books for children of all races. A bibliography is available at the desk in the Children's Room for Black, Chicano, Asian and Native American children's books, she noted.

Two librarians attending the lecture spoke up and said that the Martin Luther King Library on 86th Avenue and E. 14th Street in Oakland and the Richmond library also have good selections of Black children's books.

A gift of time is very precious. For a memorable gift that will pay off for years to come, parents might make a date with their children to visit the library. Here the child can swap for a free library card which will bring many hours of enjoyment.

Lawrence Diamond, a copy of Ms. Muse's book about children's books may contact the POST at 785-1100 or stop by 620 20th Street. The books are broken down into categories for different age groups.

DAPHINE MUSE explains the positive attributes of Black children's literature during lecture on Berkeley campus of University of California.

The list of quality Black children's books is a long one but Ms. Muse singled out several books for special mention. Louise Meriwether's "Don't Ride the Bus on Monday" is the story of Rosa Parks, the woman whose refusal to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, started the bus boycott which led to desegregation of the buses in the mid-1960's.

This book Ms. Muse said is important because besides its historical significance it presents Mrs. Parks "as a real person who lived a real life and was part of a real condition and circumstance." Too often, Ms. Muse explained, heroes and heroines in Children's literature are treated as if they are superhuman.

"Listen to the Fig Tree," the story of a blind teenage girl, Ms. Muse recommended for anyone concerned with trying to get a child to learn what rage is about and why it is awful."
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Ms. Muse credited the Council on Interracial Children’s Books and other groups with helping to keep books qualitatively good. Part of the credit goes to Blacks who have joined the groups, she added.

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